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The risks of sweeping the floor

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A Congress politician's sycophancy has reinforced the stigma, surrender and subordination inherent in the act of cleaning

The more India changes, the more it remains unchanged in some of its core values. Any activity related to sanitation has traditionally carried a stigma. Objects and persons related to such an activity share the stigma. In our languages, the metaphorical value of the words related to such activities has remained intact, indicating their continued capacity to stigmatise. This is evident from the statement made by a Congress party official and minister from Chhattisgarh who reportedly said that if the party president asked him to sweep the floor, he would do so (*The Hindu*, June 18).

The press has seen the statement as yet another example of the culture of sycophancy that prevails in India's oldest political party. That, of course, is a worrisome fact, but equally worrisome is the use of sweeping the floor as a sign of total loyalty and lack of self-respect. Despite Mahatma Gandhi's persistent struggle to impart status to cleaning, its links with lowliness persist. If sweeping the floor were merely a routine necessity, it would carry little value as a metaphor of surrender and loyalty. It acquires this value from its associations with caste and gender. In both cases, the physical requirement of bending or kneeling down imparts visual proof to its social import. Those who belong to caste groups associated with cleaning and sanitation have a low enough status in the social hierarchy to bend or kneel as a matter of routine. When a low caste person is sweeping the floor or the street, the upper caste passerby hardly needs to stop and take notice. In any case, what is there to notice? If the sweeper is someone whose father was also a sweeper, that too is part of the established order of things, hence there is no need to take note.

The wife who sweeps the floor every morning faces a similar invisibility. When a woman sweeps the floor with a broom, she is seen as doing her normal household work. In the established hierarchy of the sexes, her essential place is in the home, and the task of keeping it clean belongs to her. She may be highly educated and well employed, but her husband and his parents have a customary right to expect her to sweep the floor. Indeed, they would expect her to do it as a matter of habit, for that is what she would have learnt since childhood, i.e. to perceive it as a girl's job to help the mother in keeping the house clean. In the division of labour between the sexes, this arrangement reinforces gender roles and difference of status. Culture protects it from becoming worthy of notice. Last year, in my class on sociology of education, no student was keen to concede that division of labour in a modern family is anything more than a convenient arrangement. I asked them to imagine a nuclear family where both husband and wife are medical doctors. They come home from a journey and discover that the maid had not been coming, so the floor is dirty. 'Who will see this as something to be addressed with instant action — husband or the wife?' I asked. No one missed the point or disagreed that sweeping the floor was a marker of status and the wife will get on with it.

Political use

Let us now turn to the political use of sweeping as a metaphor. The Congress party official who has expressed his willingness to sweep the floor if the party president asks him to do so is using the metaphor at two distinct levels. That he is a senior worker of the party and now an official, and is yet willing to do something as lowly as sweeping the floor conveys obvious humility and absence of ego. He is not merely obliging or obeying; rather, he is conveying the point that advancement has not gone to his head. He is making this point to his followers or voters. They are supposedly going to say, 'Our leader will go far because he is so humble and loyal.' He can count on this impression because the culture of this imaginary dialogue is well established in the party he belongs to. Numerous men have gone up the party ladder precisely by using the route of obsequious behaviour in public. What happened to those who hesitated? We can't say with confidence because the cases to consider are so rare. Even the highly talented seem to have found the risk of being seen as hesitant sycophants unnecessarily high. The Chhattisgarh leader's humility acquires an extra social value because it is addressed to a woman. In offering to sweep the floor when a woman asks him to, he is offering to transgress gender roles which is nothing less than a phenomenal social adventure in our set-up. But the key difference between the Chhattisgarh politician and the ordinary sweeper or housewife is that he has volunteered to do something that others, who do it routinely, do out of compulsion. That is a basic distinction.

Post-independence planners of economic and social change had thought that education would weaken the forces of tradition and erase the stigma that the caste system imparts to sanitation. In the 1950s, children studying in basic schools cleaned the toilets themselves, irrespective of caste backgrounds. That is one reason why basic education did not last. A colleague of mine who recently visited rural schools in Chhattisgarh found that in some of them, the task of sweeping was assigned to a girl suffering from disability. When this was queried, the teachers said that the girl was happy fulfilling this responsibility. It was impossible to convince them that this was a case of double discrimination, completely against the vision of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). Why does the government not provide money for hiring a sweeper under SSA, they wanted to know. On this matter, officials of the Ministry of HRD routinely emphasise that SSA is supposed to encourage community participation, so it is expected that sweeping the floor would be done by community volunteers, whatever that might mean. As for teachers doing it, I recall the dialogue between two eight-year-old boys who noticed that their teacher was sweeping the floor of her classroom. One boy said to the other: "Look at poor m'am, she has to sweep the floor!"

The contract workers who keep the institution where I work clean do so under a new arrangement. Sweeping has been withdrawn from the list of permanent government jobs. After the promulgation of the Sixth Pay Commission, all 'class IV jobs' as they were called are outsourced to contractors. This is apparently a measure based on the idea that services of reliable quality require permanently insecure workers. Contractual work of this kind belongs to the unorganised sector, hence there is no mandatory structure of rules to protect the rights of sweepers. In certain organisations, sweepers are given a uniform — a mode of recognition, perhaps — but their small, fixed salaries imply that they must remain poor. This marks a change from the policy that India's welfare state had followed before the advent of neo-liberalism. As salaried employees of the government, they could afford to give a stable upbringing to their children, some of whom translated the opportunity into modest upward mobility. Sweeping as a contractual form of work supposedly reduces fiscal deficit of the state, but this is hardly a sign of India's entry into capitalist social relations. Sweeping continues to stigmatise those who do it, except for political purposes.

Disturbing

In the present case, the sycophancy communicated through willingness to sweep is especially disturbing. If there is one State where free exchange of thought is crucial to the maintenance of democracy, it is Chhattisgarh. Its tribal population is caught in what is perhaps the most tangled set of circumstances India has seen since independence. The political consensus that emerged around Salwa Judum, and the tenacity with which the project was defended by the local political class, have shocked the rest of the country. The deep political introspection required to resolve the terrible conflict in which the State is caught can hardly occur in an ethos marked by sycophancy. True, this is not a special failing of Chhattisgarh or of politics alone. Sycophancy dominates all spheres of life and no administrator can escape its capacity to encroach upon common sense. But in Chhattisgarh, a civilisational disaster is unfolding and a political culture based on sycophancy can only exacerbate it.

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